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Luke 6:46-49

Freeing Jesus: Jesus as Lord

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Sermon and Scripture

***Jesus graphic slide**

Jesus was, “a radical, nonviolent revolutionary who hung around with lepers, hookers, and crooks; wasn’t an American and never spoke English; was anti-wealth, anti-death penalty, and anti-public prayer; who was never anti-gay; who never mentioned abortion or birth control, never called the poor lazy, never justified torture, never fought for tax cuts for the wealthiest Nazarenes, never asked a leper for a co-pay; and who was a long-haired, brown-skinned, homeless community organizing, anti-slut-shaming Middle Eastern Jew.” These words are part of a monologue, written by actor and writer John Fugelsang and they have resonated deeply with a lot of progressive Christians, me included. There are posters, t-shirts and mouse pads with these words printed on them. Every time I read them, I wonder whether that Jesus would be welcome in any of our churches where we claim to follow him. In her book, *Freeing Jesus*, Diana Butler Bass shares these words with her readers as she writes about her college years and how she discovered this “new to her” Jesus.

***Book Cover and Scripture Reference Slide**

I used Bass’s book at the jumping off point for our sermon series by the same name. So, we’ve been spending time this summer walking through the different ways in which Bass has experienced Jesus in various seasons of her life, which I hope is giving us a chance to ask and answer the questions, “Who is Jesus to me right now?” and “How does my answer to that question affect how I live out my faith?”

Bass's book begins with her introduction to Jesus when she was a child growing up in a little Methodist Church. Jesus was her friend. In those early years, she learned that friendship matters and friendship with Jesus teaches us how to be better friends and neighbors. As she got older, when Sunday School transitioned from flannel boards and songs to desktops and worksheets, she experienced Jesus as a teacher who cared less about strict adherence to rules and more about nurturing a way of being in the world that valued peace, compassion, inclusion, and love. And then, in adolescence, when her family moved across the country and she began attending a more fundamental Bible Church, she learned about a very different Jesus, Jesus as savior, who rescued believers from this life into life eternal in heaven if only they would say the right words and be born again. This savior felt safe to her amid the turmoil of her teen years, but she began to wonder if her faith was more about life or death?

When she went away to college, in her classes, mission trips, and campus life, she found Jesus as Lord. This new Jesus seemed to care a lot more about how she lived than what will happen when she died. It is that Jesus we will encounter today in our text from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 6:46-49:

***Scripture Slides begin**

⁴⁶ "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you?"

^{*47} I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them.

^{*48} That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built.

^{*49} But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house."

***Lord (kyrios) slide**

Let's talk first about what it meant to be called "lord" 2000 years ago in the Roman Empire. We can do that by learning what kind of people were called lord. *Kyrios* in Greek is the word for lord or master and, in the context of the Gospel of Luke, literally meant "the one who owns you." Slaves used the word *kyrios* to address slaveowners. Students called their teachers *kyrios* as well. But the biggie in the Roman Empire was that Caesar was *kyrios* over everyone. New Testament scholar N.T. Wright says this, "The emperor was the *kyrios*, the lord of the world, the one who claimed the allegiance and loyalty of subjects through the wide empire." So, whether you were at the top of the social hierarchy or at the bottom, in the Roman Empire, Caesar was lord.

***Jesus is Lord slide**

So, when followers of Jesus proclaimed, "Jesus is Lord," it was startling. Essentially, they were declaring their freedom from the oppressive power structure present in the Roman Empire, like, when I was young and regularly announced my independence from my parents and my brother by loudly exclaiming, "You are not the boss of me." But how was it that Luke's audience sometime between 85 and 95 C.E., two generations after Jesus's death, would choose to be subject to a wandering rabbi who couldn't even keep himself alive? Bass writes, "'Jesus is Lord' was subversive and empowering, a form of submission one could choose in a world of otherwise little choice, a way of life that resulted in finding oneself by giving oneself totally and unreservedly to the crucified Jewish peasant *kyrios*." If there had to be a lord, Jesus was the lord to have.

Can you see the problem for early Jesus followers? If Jesus was Lord, then Caesar was not lord. And that was bad...and dangerous. As far as the Romans were concerned, "Jesus is Lord" was not a theological affirmation, it was a political statement. Caesar was in charge of everyone and everything and people who questioned that were dealt

with. For Jesus's followers, proclaiming "Jesus is Lord, was political, but theological as well. You see, Jesus's message was about God's vision for the world in which there were no oppressive lords, no exclusion, no wealth disparity, and no fear, only shalom, wholeness for all of creation. Jesus was lord of life, lord of the ways that would bring about the peace they yearned for.

In *Freeing Jesus*, Bass writes about how she encountered this radical revolutionary Jesus in the most unlikely places. She encountered him amid the poverty of Mexico when she and some of her college mates went there on a mission trip. There, she found herself in a community that was constructed entirely of used tires, discarded by Americans. The tires were the foundations of houses, retaining walls for the hillside, even raised garden beds. The people were living in thousands of pounds of hazardous waste, created by Americans. What did "Jesus is Lord" mean there, she wondered.

And what did it mean when she went to Europe as a missionary and ended up cleaning the kitchen of a widower. As the day went on, she wondered how she could possibly witness to him, she spoke little Dutch, he spoke little English, and besides, the kitchen was gross. This wasn't ministry. She writes, "Although I had been angry, there developed an odd companionableness to it all, this harmony of work and words. The counters began to gleam; shoes no longer stuck to the floor...When I left a few hours later, he smiled and handed me a half dozen tulips as a kindness, and it became obvious that I was the one who has been evangelized by his gratitude. Jesus had shown up in an odd reversal of roles..."

She began to reflect on what her theology professor was teaching about liberation theology and God's preferential treatment of the poor. And she took notice of the words of El Salvador's Bishop, Oscar Romero, when she heard him say, "The church would betray its own love for God and its fidelity to the gospel if it stopped being...a defender

of the rights of the poor...a humanizer of every legitimate struggle to achieve a more just society...that prepares the way for the true reign of God in history.”

I think this gets at what the author of Luke has Jesus saying in today’s text. “You say I am in charge of your life, you say you are listening to me, yet you don’t do what I say.” This passage is at the very end of Jesus’s Sermon on the Plain, which has some parallels with the more familiar Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew. Both sermons the authors’ explanation of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Luke’s version concludes bluntly, it is a problem to call Jesus your lord and not follow his ways. If Jesus is Lord of your life, you will care for the ones who are vulnerable. You will not hoard money to benefit yourself. You will struggle alongside the ones for whom justice is still a dream. You will treat all people as if you believe they were created in the image of God. You will show compassion and mercy to everyone, and you will be a peacemaker.

This is a lot of talk about a word that, frankly, we, as 21st century Americans, don’t really use very much. We don’t call our teachers or our politicians, “lord.” But the phrase, “Jesus is Lord,” is a well-used of church-speak that we say, sometimes without really understanding where it came from. It came from an oppressed people who lived amid a repressive regime where money bought power and the poor people existed only to work and serve the rich. It was a cry of liberation from the government, a way of saying, we belong to something other than Rome. And that is why, this 4th of July weekend, as I have reflected on the radical, revolutionary Jesus that was called Lord by his followers, I have wondered, what would he think of the ways in which we have fused God and country? What would he think of the churches who have flags in their sanctuaries? I mean, God is not American. God does not prefer the United States of America. God is most concerned about the ones who are vulnerable, wherever they live. And while Christians love

to argue about whether or not this is a Christian nation, I think Jesus would take one look at the ways in which we treat immigrants and refugees, people of color, and people who are sick and elderly and say, “Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not do what I tell you?”

Don’t misunderstand me. I love this country. I love what we say we stand for and who we are when we are at our best. But we must do better. Quite simply, if Jesus is our Lord, we have to do what he said. In *Freeing Jesus*, Bass reminded me of Rev. Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority of the 1980s. Falwell said the movement began in order to restore Christ’s lordship in America. And so, what did they do? They created a platform in which Archbishop Oscar Romero was a communist and heretic, Jesus embodied a traditional vision of nuclear family and sexual purity. Bass writes, “They believed Jesus’s lordship must be restored through New Testament church order, based in hierarchy, right belief, and male authority: obey the government, wives submit to your husbands, and women, learn in silence.”

How odd that Falwell’s idea (and many fundamentalists) of restoring Jesus’s lordship to America was to promote the very things Jesus struggled against: the oppression of women, right belief over compassion, inequality, division, exclusion. He convinced a whole generation of evangelical Christians that his way was the way. The truth is, Jesus never wanted to be lord of this country or any country. If he was to be lord at all, he would have wanted to be lord of individual hearts, pointing them to God and God’s vision for a world that is whole.

***Liberty and Justice slide**

Today we celebrate this nation we love. Let us love it and each other so much that we never stop working to bring liberty and justice to all people...not just the ones with money, not just the ones who are healthy, not just the ones who were born into the right neighborhoods, have the right color skin, love the right people, or worship the right

way. All the people. And let us never forget, it is only when we are working for the common good and struggling with the ones who are vulnerable, that we can in good conscience claim Jesus as Lord. Amen.